

420 Fulton

This house is a good example of the “transition” period between the flamboyant Victorian designs and the more conservative Prairie school. This simplified, post-Victorian design is sometimes called the American Foursquare. This box-like design contained “the most house for the dollar” which is how the American Foursquare was advertised in the early 1900s. The emerging middle class required a new type of house to answer a need for a less formal lifestyle than that of the Victorians.

This house was designed by the prominent Elgin architect, W. W. Abell, in 1907 and commissioned by the Swedish Evangelical Bethlehem Lutheran Church as a parsonage to complement their church at Villa and Fulton Streets (now a city-owned parking lot). Another house had previously occupied this property, but church officials determined it would be more economical to raze that building and construct a new one in its place. This property remained a church parsonage until 1961 when it was sold to the William Braheny family. Braheny was Secretary to the Chairman of the Milwaukee Railroad. In 1978 it was sold to the current owners, one of whom is also an employee of the Milwaukee Railroad.

John Craft was the minister and first resident of this house which replaced an older parsonage at the same site. It cost \$5,000 to build and was paid for by Swedish Meatball Suppers and the selling of lumber from the original parsonage.

The church was a victim of the famous 1920 Palm Sunday tornado. The Courier states “. . .the steeple of the Bethlehem Swedish Lutheran Church was snapped off at the base, did a somersault en route to the ground, and was deposited on the ground, intact, resembling a giant, inverted ice cream cone”. It was determined that the structure was too damaged to repair so pews, windows, and other elements were salvaged. The church is now located on Grand Avenue by Lord’s Park and is known as the Bethlehem Lutheran Church.

As with many houses in Elgin, there is a blend of styles evident in 420 Fulton. The Prairie style influences can be seen on the exterior with the emphasis on the horizontal lines. There is banding of the cornice and long, low, continuous roofs with

large overhangs. Bays at both the east and west sides and dormers on the roof break up the “boxiness” of this Foursquare. Classical elements are present in the modillions beneath the roof eave and the porch columns. The wood detail under the front window and to the right of the door, plain but somewhat unusual in design, draws interest to the entryway.

The room to the left of the entryway was originally the pastor’s study. The classical influence is strong in the panelled pocket doors (between the hallway and study as well as between the living room and dining room) and the wood, Ionic columns at the entrance to the living room. This influence continues with the circular window at the front of the house and is repeated in a similarly designed window on the stair landing. The other windows are much larger than typical Victorian windows. Technology had developed to the point where it was possible to manufacture large panes of glass. Although multi-pane windows are considered a decorative accent now, they were necessary years ago when only relatively small panes of glass could be made. The newel posts contain a leaf design carved at the top of a plain, square base. The present kitchen has been enlarged by enclosing the space that was originally the back porch. However, it seems to fit in well with the generous, open proportions of the other rooms of the house.

In reaction to the stiff, formal lifestyle of the Victorian era, the Foursquare accommodates the more relaxed lifestyle of the early twentieth century. The current owners describe this home as “real livable” still—81 years after it was built!

